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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000587

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL; NSC FOR
E. MILLARD

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PINR PARM

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT KUMARATUNGA TELLS AMBASSADOR

COHABITATION ISN'T WORKING; TIE-UP WITH LEFTIST JVP LIKELY

Classified By: Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 B, D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: I spent two hours 15 minutes with President Kumaratunga on Saturday, April 5. I didn't learn much. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) I met with President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga for two hours 15 minutes at her residence Saturday afternoon, April 5. She was attended by former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, while I was alone. I was supposed to meet with her the previous day. But after waiting 50 minutes beyond the appointed hour - a time she had proposed, by the way - I got up and left. A few minutes later, she reached me on my cellphone, apologized in a charming and disarming way and we rescheduled for the next day.

13. (C) When I arrived on this occasion, I was surprised to find her and Kadirgamar waiting for me. They escorted me from the reception area to the rear garden, where we sat under one of the world's largest banyan trees. We also sat under a south Asian sun that would have blistered a barnacle, and it did in the event blister my bald head. CBK glowed, as it were, in an outsized way, while Kadirgamar and I sweated. So I was compensated in weight loss for a meeting that came close to wasting my time.

D'S SPEECH

14. (C) I asked whether she had seen the Deputy Secretary's speech at the CSIS conference, and whether she had noted his comments asserting the USG's conviction that she deserves respect and inclusion in Sri Lanka's attempt at peace. She thanked him for the remarks but not with evident conviction. It was as though this was her due and thus not so special. One encounters this regal attitude in CBK often. It is very annoying.

COHABITATION

15. (C) She probably spent an hour discoursing on this subject. I began by stressing once again our belief that cooperation between her party, the PA, and the UNP would increase the odds of success in the peace negotiations. Such cooperation would surely get the LTTE's attention and make it impossible for the Tigers to claim, as they now occasionally do, that division between the PA and the UNP means that they cannot be trusted to honor any deal with the Tamils. In her discursive, repetitive reply, she told me how she had been mistreated by the Prime Minister, how her party cadre had been abused by the UNP and thus, she concluded, she was now completely lacking in trust in the government. She did not exclude the possibility of improving cohabitation, but she said it was entirely up to the government to take the initiative.

PA-JVP ALLIANCE

16. (C) After acknowledging that as a foreign diplomat, I of course had no business venturing into Sri Lanka's internal affairs, I proceeded to ask her whether she intended to do a deal with the hard left JVP. She admitted she hoped to but said there were still a few "minor matters" to be sorted out. In response to various queries from me, she said: the JVP is truly democratic (unlike the UNP and the LTTE); it has accepted that the free market will prevail in Sri Lanka (I said I doubted it, citing the JVP party leader's comment on a TV show last week that his party embraced the Cuban model (!)); it has agreed to a federal solution to Sri Lanka (again I cited numerous public comments by JVP leaders that they favor a unitary state with an unspecified amount of devolution); and that it was less inclined to violence and corruption than the PM's UNP (to the former assertion I politely replied that the JVP had twice carried out armed insurrections in Sri Lanka; to the latter, I said the JVP might be less corrupt but that could be because it had never held power). Our disagreements on the JVP, as the foregoing suggests, were frequent, but were expressed goodnaturedly.

IRAQ

17. (C) As I got up to leave, I asked her for her views on our military action against Saddam's regime. She said very

little in reply, her major point being that she wished we had given inspections a chance. (From various sources, we know she embraces the French view utterly.)

COMMENT

18. (C) This was CBK at her most aggravating. She spoke interminably and offered very little that she hadn't told me several times before. During her rambling riff on Ranil's perfidy, I was reminded of a great put-down I once heard about a player on my college baseball team: does so-and-so, one teammate mused, ever think anything that he doesn't say? Sometimes, indeed, CBK seems to be speaking in the arrogant manner of one who believes every thought she has is expressible. Earlier this week, I ran into John Hume, the Irish Nobel laureate, who had just met CBK. His assessment of her was to the point: "The woman is crazy, as self-absorbed as any human being I've ever met!" I do not think she is nuts because she frequently can be cogent but she does seem occasionally to be diagonally parked across sanity's border. Perhaps that is understandable given the personal tragedies she has endured in her life, most recently her near-death experience with an LTTE suicide bomber.

19. (C) Such news as there was in this meeting was not good. Cohabitation is in bad repair and a deal between the PA and the JVP looks likely. The latter could be followed by a snap election, which could set back peace talks for quite a while.

WILLS